

Vanier Forum on Transit

“Heads should roll ...”

Seeking Transparency and Accountability

October 1, 2018

Prepared by Ottawa Transit Riders’ Group



<http://www.ottawatransitriders.ca>

Summary

On October 1, 2018, The **Ottawa Transit Riders'** group / **le groupe des usagers de transport en commun d'Ottawa** along with the Campaign for Free and Accessible Transit Ottawa (now Free Transit Ottawa) and the Healthy Transportation Coalition, hosted a Vanier Forum on Transit. It was a follow-up to a Vanier Forum held on June 18, 2018.

Wants:

Participants want transit that is *affordable*, *accessible* and *reliable*.

Participants want OC Transpo to be *transparent* and *accountable* to riders.

Problems:

- Buses are unreliable
- Routes are often cancelled
- Riders often have to wait for long periods of time
- Connections are poor
- Communication about buses is poor
- Poor value for money – fares are too high for level of service
- Changes are confusing and not well-considered
- Drivers often fail to ensure that riders with mobility issues are settled before driving off
- Buses are often dangerously overcrowded
- The re-routing of the #12 is a problem
- The new #19 and #20 fail to meet riders' needs

Solutions:

- More buses – please re-consider laying off drivers and selling buses – participants want more buses in underserved areas
- Restore the #12 to end/start west of Bank
- Add additional #12 buses or re-route another bus (#17 for example) to go from Centretown to Vanier via Montréal Road
- Re-route the #20 to travel on Beechwood where the old #5 and #19 used to go
- Improve communications about buses
- Fix the signs on front of bus and inside to provide correct route information
- Install electronic GPS-connected screens indicating upcoming buses in bus shelters
- Re-consider scheduling practices so that drivers have time to help passengers, plus more 'recovery time' so that if a bus is late on one route, there is time to make it up before starting the next route.

Background

The first Vanier Forum was hosted by the Campaign for Free and Accessible Transit Ottawa and the Healthy Transportation Coalition (<https://www.healthytransportation.ca/>) and sponsored by Hollaback (<https://www.ihollaback.org/>) and the Amalgamated Transit Union 279 (<https://atu279.com/>). It took place on June 18, 2018 and was attended by about 60 people. A report from the first forum is attached as an annex.

The issues discussed at that meeting included:

- Unreliable buses
- Routes cancelled
- Overcrowded buses
- Safety and security

It should be noted that as of June 2018, OC Transpo had not announced the proposed changes to the #12.

Massive re-routing of buses all over Ottawa – September 2, 2018

On September 2, 2018, OC Transpo undertook a massive re-organization of bus routes across the city in anticipation of the upcoming Light Rail Train (LRT). They conducted no consultations with riders or communities.

The disruption for transit riders was terrible:

- The #12 bus was re-routed to end and start at Queen and Metcalfe – a long way away from where its riders want to go (Kent and Sparks)
- The #11 bus was snipped at each end, no longer travelling to Bayshore in the West or Rideau Centre in Centretown. Many of its regular riders are elderly and/or mobility impaired and now have to transfer to get to their destinations
- Buses were re-routed down Queen even though it was under construction
- Consequently, many buses were immediately detoured
- Printed maps are wrong, apps 'lose' buses on detour so are unable to provide accurate information
- Many front bus signs are wrong, leading to confusion especially among people not familiar with the system
- Onboard route information (which people with vision impairment rely on) is now wrong
- Riders from all over Ottawa have been writing to us to report serious problems with their local buses – details on specific neighbourhood problems can be found on our website.

Two people from Vanier who rely on the #12 decided to create the *Ottawa Transit Riders' Group* (www.ottawatransitriders.ca) to address transit rider concerns and to pressure OC Transpo into improving their service.

Vanier Forum – October 2018

Keeping in mind that OC Transpo does not consult with riders or communities, the newly formed coalition of transit advocates decided to start the campaign for better transit with a second Vanier Forum on Transit, which took place on October 1, 2018.

Vanier Councillor, Mathieu Fleury attended as did both candidates for his seat, Thierry Harris and Matt Lowe.

There were about 40-45 people in attendance. About one-third of participants spoke French at a table facilitated by Carolyn Lecorre from the Campaign for Free and Accessible Transit Ottawa (now re-named Free Transit Ottawa). The remaining participants were divided among tables facilitated by other members of the coalition.

Needs

We started by asking people 1) who uses transit and 2) what do people need from public transit?

Transit is about accessibility. People from all walks of life use transit, but for some people, transit is an essential service. Transit users include people who do not have driver's licenses, teenagers, seniors, people with disabilities, people who do not have access to cars, and children.

People use transit to get to work, to school, to appointments, to grocery shopping, daycares, etc. Some people who primarily use the bus to commute talked about the advantage of taking the bus downtown where they didn't have to worry about finding and paying for parking plus dealing with traffic.

People want buses that run all day long. They want regular, reliable schedules and buses that connect with other buses. They want to be safe and comfortable on the bus. Many people spoke of their frustration that drivers often fail to ensure that riders with mobility issues are settled before driving away – they want drivers to be more considerate and to have the TIME to help passengers.

The French-speaking table reported that their three priorities were:

- Routes efficaces (efficient routes)
- Fiabilité (reliability)
- Tarif (fares)

Other tables reported that their top priorities were:

- Fares
- Reliability
- Communication
- Safety
- More bus service and better snow clearing in winter

- Free transit on Sundays
- Lower fares and striving toward free transit
- Contingency plan for when traffic and riders exceed normal flow, to send buses on alternative routes

Problems (and Solutions)

There are both system-wide problems and issues specific to Vanier.

Participants complained that Vanier buses (#12, #14, #18, #19, and #20) are unreliable. Routes are often cancelled leaving riders waiting, buses are often dangerously crowded, and connections are uncertain. People complained that drivers failed to ensure that people with mobility issues were settled before driving off – several had stories of falling.

There is limited space for people with strollers or for people using wheelchairs, walkers or other mobility devices. People with children and those with invisible disabilities talked of not being able to access priority seating. There is sometimes conflict among various users of transit – having to deal with overcrowding exacerbates such conflict.

The double-decker buses are a mixed blessing. Those who are mobile enough to go upstairs can usually find a seat. But those who cannot climb the stairs often have to deal with dangerous overcrowding on the lower level.

Specifically concerning the re-routing of the #12, several participants were at the forum just to discuss this change. OC Transpo has re-routed this commuter bus from its preferred start and end at Bank/Sparks/Kent to Queen and Metcalfe leaving Vanier residents no easy way to travel between Vanier and Centretown. There is no apparent advantage to the new stop location and many participants felt that the changes demonstrate that OC Transpo is unresponsive to Vanier needs. A map of the change is provided as an annex.

At the table where councillor Mathieu Fleury was sitting, there was a proposal to re-route the new bus #17 along Montréal Road to ease overcrowding on the #12. The new #17 is under-used as it currently travels along Beechwood, which is already well-served by many buses, and starts/finishes in Wateridge – a community still under development. Participants liked this proposal as it seemed to solve two problems – providing appropriate service to people who want to travel between Vanier and Centretown (west of Bank) and increasing the number of options for people who want to travel along Montréal Road (thus reducing pressure on the overcrowded #12).

We would ask that OC Transpo consider this option.

Participants also complained about poor communications and bus tracking apps not working. This means that people have to make a choice about which bus stop to wait at and then are left angry and frustrated as their bus fails to show up AND they miss alternative buses. Many people in Vanier do not have access to online resources. Not everyone has a smart phone or is

willing to use data to access online bus schedules so screens at the bus stops are recommended.

Participants felt that fares are far too high for the poor quality of service. There are rumours that fare avoidance is common; this was partially confirmed by a driver that we spoke to outside the Forum. Advocates for free transit argue that City Hall should review making transit fares in Ottawa free. Some participants at the Forum suggested free days for seniors.

Regarding the #19 and #20 buses, the former bus #5, was changed to #19 a few years ago and in September, this route was split into two routes - #19 and #20. Riders are not happy with the changes. The #20 travels from St Laurent to the Montfort Hospital then to Beechwood, meaning that most people have to transfer to use it. Considering that people going to the Montfort might be frail and vulnerable, this is not well-considered. After the Forum, a resident wrote to us to suggest a modification to the #20 route. Currently, the westbound bus travels a short way along Beechwood, then turns on Loyer, then Barrette, then St Charles. This is frustrating since buses to New Edinburgh have traditionally stopped on Beechwood in front of the Metro / Books on Beechwood. Locals report not being able to find the bus. This resident suggested that the bus continue along Beechwood, to use the stops that riders are familiar with, then go over the bridge to service the Garry J Armstrong residence before looping back.

Vanier participants are calling on OC Transpo to cancel their plans to lay off hundreds of drivers and sell buses. We want these buses re-routed to serve underserved neighbourhoods like Vanier.

As part of the revitalization of Montréal Road, it is being proposed that some bus stops be removed. Most participants were neutral on this plan as long as the trade-off was more shelters.

Some participants wanted better snow clearing so that riders don't have to climb over snow banks. Several suggested that OC Transpo should have contingency plans for buses to use alternative routes if the regular route is too crowded or during times of extreme weather. During the snow storm a few years ago, many buses got stuck on residential streets and contributed to traffic problems. If they had stuck to main roads, they could have helped move people around instead.

People suggested more dedicated bus-only lanes.

Consequences

Participants at the Vanier Forum were angry. They felt that the City of Ottawa has spent so much time, effort, and money on the LRT that city staff are unable to consider the needs of underserved neighbourhoods like Vanier.

Many of the decisions, such as the re-routing of the #12, have no obvious benefit. OC Transpo is not transparent with their decision-making process so we have no idea what factors they consider. We have no idea if rider needs are taken into consideration or how much weight is given to rider demands.

Several people wanted real consequences for the people at OC Transpo who made such terrible decisions. Participants called for people to be fired.

There is a growing backlash against the LRT in Vanier. Residents may have been in favour of the LRT before, but they are becoming concerned that investment in the LRT is apparently going to result in worse bus service for residents of Vanier.

Next steps

The Ottawa Transit Riders' Group will continue to consult with Vanier residents who were not able to attend this meeting. We will be reaching out to people online.

There will be a follow up meeting in March 2019.

The Ottawa Transit Riders' Group is reaching out to other people mad about inadequate transit service across Ottawa. We plan to recruit representatives of various neighbourhoods to explain the specific issues in each place. We believe that we will have more influence if we work together.

We are also reaching out to local community groups such as the Vanier Community Association to collaborate.

We have petitions on our website to call on OC Transpo to restore the 11 and the 12. We intend to attend upcoming Transit Commission meetings to present our findings and our petitions.

We also plan to research how other cities manage to provide transit services to their residents. We will be looking for best practices and lessons learned to provide recommendations.

If you have comments on this report or want to get involved, please visit our website at www.ottawatransitriders.ca or email us at OttawaTransitRiders@gmail.com. You can also follow us on Twitter @OttTransitRider

Free Transit Ottawa – <https://freetransitottawa.ca/why-free-transit/>
Healthy Transportation Coalition - <http://www.healthytransportation.ca/>
Vanier Community Association- <http://www.vanier-association.com/en/>

Annex – First Vanier Bus Riders’ Forum, June 18, 2018

On Monday, June 18 at the Vanier Community Service Centre more than 60 people gathered for a forum to discuss transit issues and solutions affecting Vanier. Organized by the ***Campaign for Free and Accessible Transit***, the forum was also sponsored by the *Vanier Community Association*, the *Rideau-Rockcliffe Community Resource Centre*, the *Overbrook Community Association*, *Hollaback* and the *Healthy Transportation Coalition*.

The format of the forum gave participants the opportunity to break into small groups to identify issues and potential solutions followed by a facilitated discussion where each of the small groups reported their ideas to the whole.

Vanier residents rely on public transit to get around their community as well as getting to work participants reported and they face specific challenges with a number of routes. Routes 12, 14, and 18, all crosstown routes, were frequently mentioned in discussion. These are busy routes, used by commuters to more suburban communities as well as residents of Vanier. Overcrowding and delays on these routes are frequent and reliability of service is a problem. Participants highlighted failure to maintain schedules or to run sufficient buses to handle the flow of people on these routes. In addition, users were concerned about the lack of night service and reduced services on the weekends. Service is geared to heavy commute times, leaving residents who want to use the bus to get around at off-peak hours with a service that doesn’t match their needs.

Solutions to some of these problems may come with the opening of light rail transit stations according to Councillor Mathieu Fleury and other participants. The use of certain crosstown routes by suburban commuters will possibly be eased and overcrowding on the 12, 14, and 18 may diminish. A reorientation of service, better north-south routes to link with the trains at the southern edge of the ward, and a redesign or splitting of route 12 would potentially improve the transit options of residents.

However, the frequency of buses and a lack of reliability of service on busy routes have also to be addressed. One way to address the problem of reliability is to provide better methods of determining when a bus will arrive. Participants proposed adding GPS trackers to buses that can be monitored through phones or screens at bus stops. And they would like to see night service increased with the possibility of 24 hour service introduced on certain routes and a better service on weekends.

Another solution proposed to the problem of delayed buses is dedicated lanes on major routes. This would ensure that buses are not held up by traffic and can meet their schedules. Better enforcement of traffic rules would also prevent cars and trucks from parking in ways that impede the buses on their routes.

Waiting for the bus at an inconveniently placed stop or one without shelter from the weather or a place to sit were problems encountered by many participants. The positioning of stops on Beechwood, Loyer and Joliette Streets and snow clearing on Brittany Drive were identified as particular challenges. Some participants had the impression that bus stops are becoming less hospitable by design – that shelters and seating have been removed from certain stops to prevent their use by homeless people or others. This, they felt, was harsh, unnecessary and added to the inconvenience of waiting for unreliable buses, particularly in winter. Banks of snow piled up in front of stops was another inconvenience that made getting to or getting on and off treacherous and difficult.

Snow clearing, shelters and seating need to be maintained and there is room for innovation. One participant suggested that attractive, interesting shelters, with funky or amusing designs would encourage more people to use the system. Adding something interesting to the streetscape would make passengers feel more like OC Transpo was part of the community.

Once on the bus, the arrangement of space can be a safety problem, particularly for those with mobility challenges. Whether you are a senior or you use a walker, a scooter or a wheelchair, being able to sit safely at the front of the bus is important. Parents with strollers are also hoping to use this space at the front of the bus where seats can be raised to accommodate strollers. On overcrowded buses, these groups may find that there is insufficient space for both. Redesigning the interior space of buses to provide more room for wheeled appliances and to preserve the front of the bus for the mobility challenged would mean less anxiety and more civility.

The behaviour of unruly passengers on buses is another safety concern, one that drivers are not always prepared to handle according to participants. Drivers need to be able to step in when passengers are threatening others. One participant suggested that social workers be engaged to ride the buses and help de-escalate problems or assist those with mental health issues.

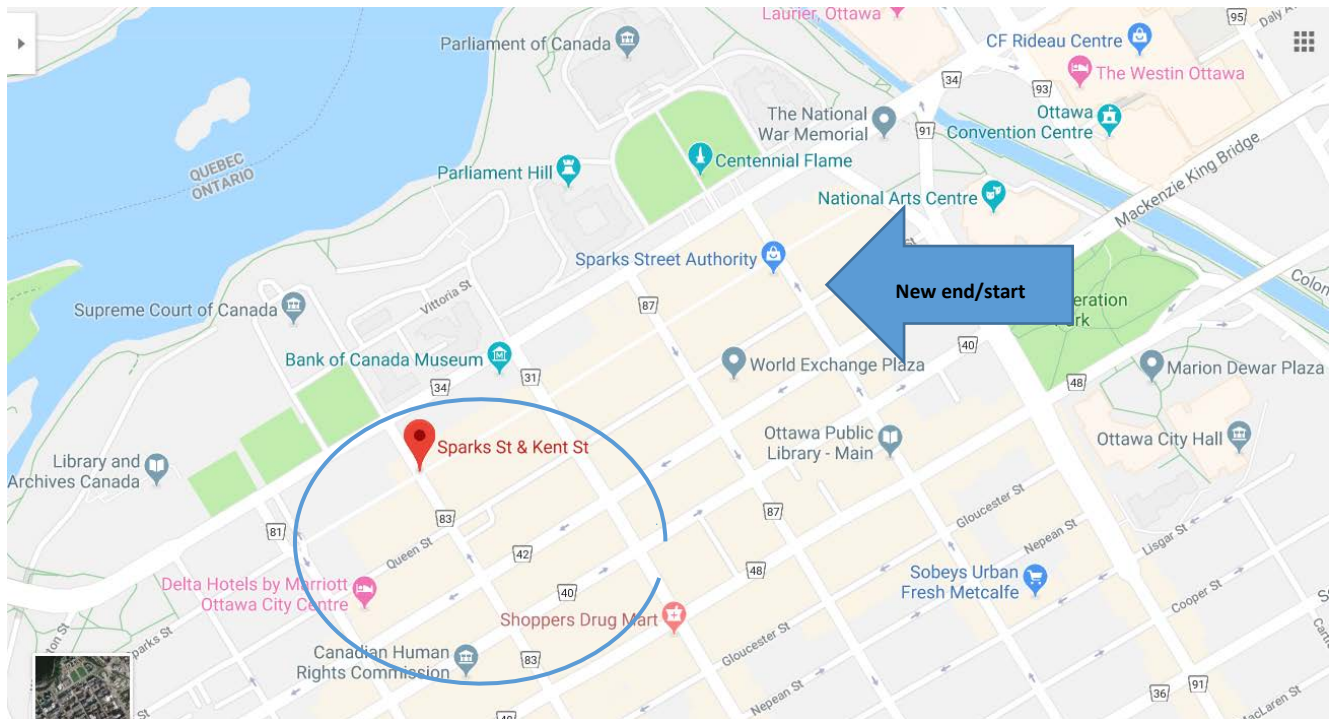
Regular cash fares for Ottawa are higher than in most Canadian cities and this discourages Vanier riders. While EquiPass and discounts provided to seniors, youth and students make the bus more affordable for some, the high cost of a ride is a factor affecting how frequently they can use the service for participants who don't qualify. One participant suggested that Presto cards should be capped with monthly costs beyond \$120 being absorbed.

While the City of Ottawa has moved away from using fare zones, some participants at the forum felt this was unfair. Those who use the bus to get around their neighbourhood on short jaunts feel they are effectively subsidizing those who use the bus for longer voyages, such as suburban commuters. A zoned system of fares they propose would be more equitable and more environmentally friendly, since it would reward those whose rides consume less fuel. Differential fares for "skip-stop" and express service would also be part of the solution.

The idea of a Riders' Association was raised and participants were interested.

At the end of the session, a participant from Hollaback, a community group that works to prevent sexual harassment on the buses, encouraged participants to get involved and to take action. All too often it seems that organizations like OC Transpo cannot be compelled to listen to the problems of users. But, she related, Hollaback had started as a small but vocal group with no standing. When the problem of harassment became more of an issue for OC Transpo, Hollaback was the one organization that could provide advice on how to address the issue. They now have a seat at the table and meet monthly with OC Transpo. This story provided a good finish to a very lively discussion.

Annex – Map of route 12 – preferred route vs. OC Transpo change



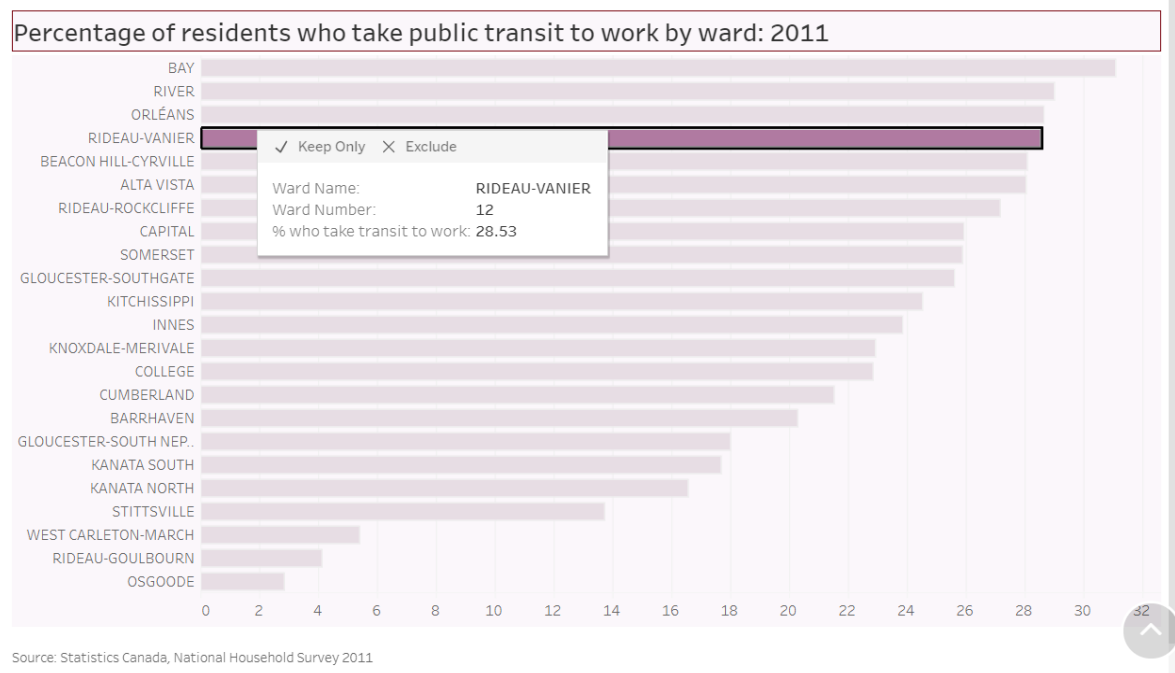
Preferred route: near Kent/Sparks

- Many people work in this part of town – riders want the bus to end/start here
- There are no other options for people going to Vanier
- Near the Lyon street LRT
- Few traffic problems, advance green arrow for turning left onto Bank
- Space for lay-ups on Kent
- Good connection for other routes (interlining)

OC Transpo's change – Queen/Metcalf

- Route is not any shorter or faster than preferred route
- Long walk for those west of Bank who want to go to Vanier
- No demand for this stop – people in this part of town have other options to Vanier (#14 for example)
- Buses have to deal with terrible traffic on Elgin – frequent delays
- No space to pull over – no place for lay-ups, no easy link to other routes for interlining

Annex – Percentage of people who commute by public transit (by ward, 2011)



Source: Statistics Canada, National Household Survey, 2011 via Boyce, Martin, Kira Locken, and Olivia Robinson. 2 October 2018. "Route rage: Frustrated commuters feel left behind by OC Transpo changes." *Capital Current*. [<https://capitalcurrent.ca/route-rage-frustrated-commuters-feel-left-behind-by-oc-transpo-after-changes/>]